

In Chinese foreign minister's outburst, a test for Trudeau

The dressing down of a Canadian reporter by Wang Yi earlier this month is not the first time Chinese officials have shown arrogance on Canadian soil. When dealing with China going forward, self-interest and self-respect need to be first in Trudeau's mind, argues John Bruk.

BY: JOHN BRUK (/CONTRIBUTORS/JOHNB/) / JUNE 15, 2016



Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meets with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, June 1, 2016. REUTERS/Chris Wattie

The image of China's minister of foreign affairs wagging his finger at a Canadian reporter after being asked a question on human rights earlier this month demonstrates the kind of aggressive and unpleasant behaviour by senior Chinese officials that makes Canadians less and less enamoured with China. Minister Wang Yi admonished the reporter by saying: “You have no right to speak on this. The Chinese people have the right to speak, you are prejudiced and arrogant.”

Or is it Mr. Yi who is “prejudiced and arrogant?”

Regretfully, we've seen this kind of behaviour before from Chinese senior officials on visits to Canada. In January, Han Jun, China's vice-minister of financial and economic affairs, arrived in Ottawa for discussions with senior bureaucrats about the prospect of negotiating a free trade deal with Canada. He opened the exploratory talks by demanding Canadian concessions on investment restrictions imposed by the former Conservative government, and a commitment to build an energy pipeline to the coast as a condition to the successful conclusion of negotiations, brazenly challenging newly elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who had not endorsed that pipeline.

By its arrogance and aggression, China's government is trying to see how easily Canada's prime minister can be maneuvered in discussions during his forthcoming visit to China, and how easy it will be to exact more concessions from the new government beyond what China had accomplished in negotiations with the Harper government.

These kind of put-downs by China will test Trudeau's grit and ability to assert Canadian self-respect and stand up to China, while maintaining a cordial and working relationship. That will be the telling test of Trudeau's statesmanship.

This is not the first time that Canada is being challenged by the aggressive behaviour of major powers. However, to my knowledge, apart from the late General de Gaulle, it is the first time that the leaders of any government have been so openly disrespectful of Canadians on their visits to Canada.

Throughout our history, Canadian governments successfully dealt with the imperious ways of first Great Britain and then the United States. On each occasion Canadian leaders asserted self-respect and self-interest, while successfully developing cordial and profitable business relationships with both countries, who are today our closest allies and most profitable trading partners. Hopefully Canada's current prime minister can accomplish the same, bearing in mind that we Canadians will not tolerate a government that does not demonstrably assert our self-respect and advance our self-interest.

Regretfully the task facing Trudeau vis-à-vis relations with China is not helped by a host of professionals, retired senior politicians and senior civil servants who have been promoting wider and wider opening up to China without demonstrating specific benefits to Canadians at large. It is hard to imagine that China would be so bold in its high-handed ways with Canadian government officials were they not so encouraged by those well-connected Canadians.

Opening up more to China without thinking of the consequences is a fool's way. Why not first reflect on why Hong Kong and Taiwan, who know China's government best, as well as China's close neighbours the Philippines and Vietnam, are either cooling off towards or

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distancing themselves from China, rather than expanding their relations with the country? Our prime minister and all our elected officials have a serious responsibility to have satisfactory answers to those questions before entering into any substantive negotiations with China's government. In fact, why not visit those areas and learn from those governments first?

How we develop our relationship with China might well determine our future, for better or for worse. What is required is in depth analysis and open discussion, first and foremost by our elected provincial and federal representatives. No major issues should be dealt with by Trudeau on his forthcoming visit to China without first developing a sound Canada-China strategy based on Canadian self-interest. Otherwise, bit by bit, we will lose both our self-respect and our prosperity.

Just reflect on the failure of successive Canadian governments to develop a winning strategy for trade with China, resulting in our trade surplus with China of \$1.6 billion in 1988 reversing to a deficit of \$45 billion – and growing – by the end of 2015. Will the government please tell us how have we been paying off those deficits with China that, combined, exceed \$400 billion, and how we will continue to pay for those increasing deficits with China, as those very deficits have eroded our traditional trade surpluses? If the only way out is to sell our core assets to government of China-owned corporations and thereby destroy the basis of our prosperity, Canadians should expect that a concerned opposition would move a motion of “no confidence.” This lopsided trade and investment relationship with China's government is a troublesome situation that calls for a wide open national debate. Was it not Trudeau who promised open government and in depth debate of issues important to Canadians? And is our economic well-being not a very important issue?

No less troublesome is the possibility that this kind of behaviour by China's senior officials might sour Canadians' feelings towards Chinese immigrants, making it more difficult to have them assimilate into our Canadian family. Immigration from China, especially of young people, can greatly benefit Canada, as has previous influxes from other parts of the world. We must not blame those immigrants for the actions of the government that they are happy to distance themselves from in ever increasing numbers. It is so heartwarming to see young Chinese immigrants celebrating Canada Day, together with other Canadians of so many diverse backgrounds, reflecting the pride of belonging to this great country.



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